

1978

The Architecture of the Bryn Mawr Campus

George E. Thomas

Published in *Bryn Mawr Now*. The date is not visible on the document and is based on a reference to the lecture being given during the Centennial year of Joseph Taylor's will.

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.brynmawr.edu/facilities_history



Part of the [Architecture Commons](#), and the [Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#)

Citation

Thomas, George E., "The Architecture of the Bryn Mawr Campus" (1978). *Architecture, Grounds, and History*. Paper 5.
http://repository.brynmawr.edu/facilities_history/5

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. http://repository.brynmawr.edu/facilities_history/5

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE BRYN MAWR CAMPUS

by GEORGE THOMAS

Visiting Lecturer in Growth and Structure of Cities

Excerpts from a memorial lecture for the late John Forsythe, Treasurer of Bryn Mawr College for 24 years, given by the noted architectural historian George Thomas, who this year is teaching several courses in the College's interdepartmental cities program, including one this semester on Philadelphia architecture from the 19th century Greek Revival period to today's nationally recognized "Philadelphia School."

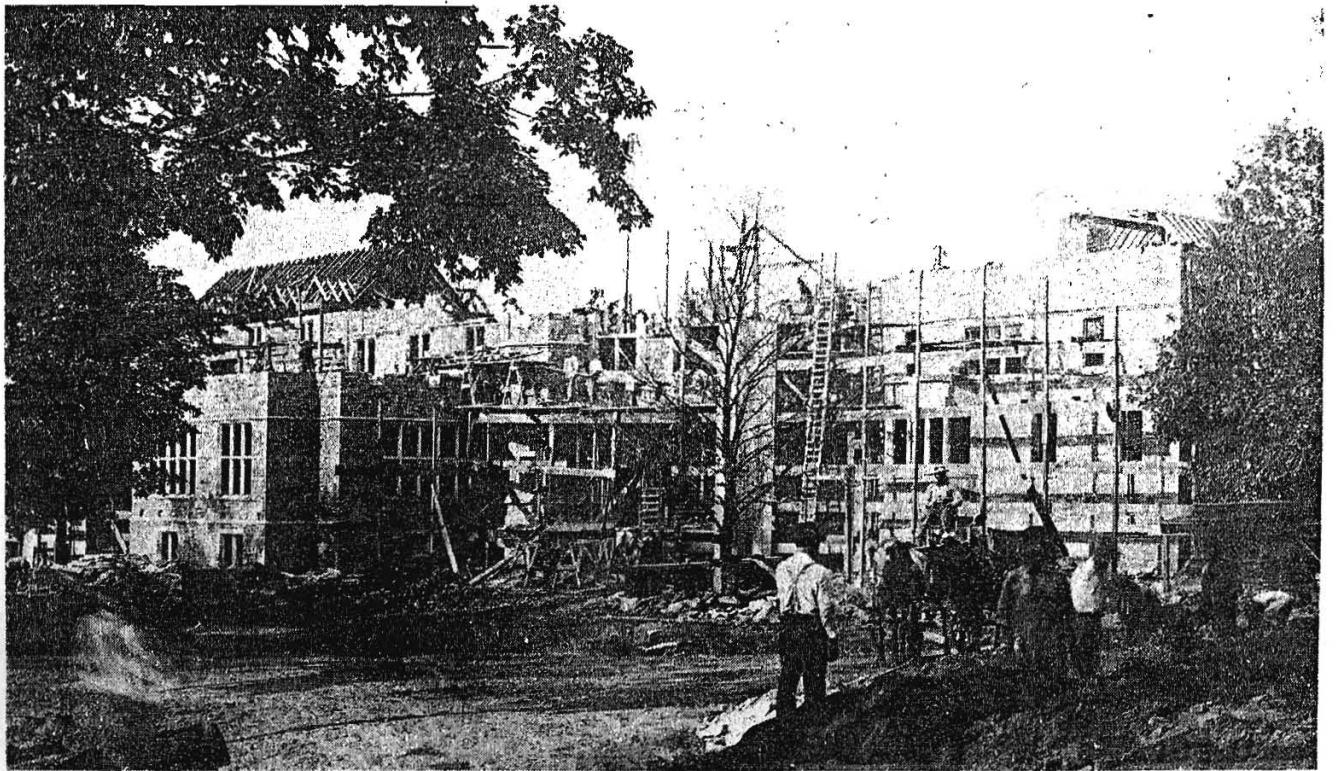
In this the Centennial year of Dr. Joseph Taylor's will that provided for Bryn Mawr College, and in the light of Mr. Forsythe's interests in the orderly growth and development of the College, it seems appropriate for us to look back at the early planning and design decisions when the layout of the College was established — providing the framework of a century of growth.

To all of us who are intimately acquainted with Bryn Mawr and who have seen the charms of the campus in spring, summer, fall and winter, the arrangement and form of the buildings seem immutable. But the four most recent buildings of the campus, the science building, the Canaday Library and the two newest dormitories, Erdman and Haffner, are radically different in form and style from the earlier structures, and are indicative of major changes in architectural theory, changes which in fact altered American architecture in the years after World War II, and which affected our perception of the architecture and planning of the late 19th century. To such an extent has this occurred that on less fortunate campuses and in vast areas of entire cities, those late Victorian buildings are being demolished, one after the other, due to a rejection of the conventions of 19th-century architecture — particularly the revival of historical styles, the applied ornament, and the fictive use of one material and structural system to suggest another.

In place of the idea of architecture by association, which gave us the scholar's towered retreat into another world, the revolutionary architecture of the 20th century found its analogy in the contemporary machine — direct, forceful, vital, a symbol for our time. And instead of recounting and interpreting the actual built environment, revolutionary historians too often wrote about what they hoped would emerge, for example, representing the progress of the tall office building with George Howe's PSFS tower of 1932 while ignoring the New York office skyscrapers, or by displaying the few houses actually erected by LeCorbusier, Rietveld, and Gropius over and over again, as if they represented the principal currents in domestic architecture.

In the process, a tremendous gulf developed between popular (which existed in reality) and avant garde architecture (which existed in books), one which the historians were loathe to acknowledge. It was only in the 1950s, after the Depression and World War II, that the new architecture actually appeared with any frequency. Then its designers were usually pupils of the revolutionary historians; its funding was often produced by public agencies; the result was an architecture largely divorced from the public, who greeted it with a mixture of indifference and hostility. And no wonder, for often in the new office complexes and housing projects little or no effort was made to relate to the needs of the users; as for example in Philadelphia's Penn Center renewal district, or the mid 1950s Pruitt Igoe housing in St. Louis, which proved to be so destructive of life that it had to be demolished building by building.

It is no wonder that historic preservation has enjoyed a sudden explosion of interest. Recall for instance the angry outcry over the closing of the Bellevue Stratford Hotel, when the spectre was raised of some icy-cold box replacing the old building whose decorative richness added much to Philadelphia social events. The consequences of such a split between architect and public should have been obvious. But



"At the end of the century, Rockefeller Hall . . . closing the campus off to the west, directing the attention inwards, back to the College center." The Rockefeller Hall archway and towers under construction.

rather than seek a rapprochement, Joseph Hudnut, former dean of the graduate school of architecture at Harvard, wrote in the 1950s that what was needed was not a less austere and demanding architecture, but instead a new client who would be "devoid of sentiment," with the values "necessary to a collective — industrial scheme of life." It not only looked but also sounded like 1984.

Now it was bad enough that a totally new value system was largely imposed, from the top down so to speak; what was worse — and this brings us back to our subject, the campus of Bryn Mawr and the architecture of Walter Cope and John Stewardson — the historians had gone out of their way to attack savagely the turn-of-the-century architecture, to the extent that it could scarcely be justified, let alone appreciated and protected. It has taken another generation, led by Yale art historian Vincent Scully and Philadelphia architect Robert Venturi, to point towards a rediscovery of the past. They have asserted that life, which is inherently complex, demands more than mute and highly personal modernism. For them the reductivist motto of post-war architects, "Less is more," has failed; in its place Venturi comments, "Less is a bore." But what alternatives are there? For Venturi and Scully, Charles Moore and Robert Stern, there is the past, the rejected architec-

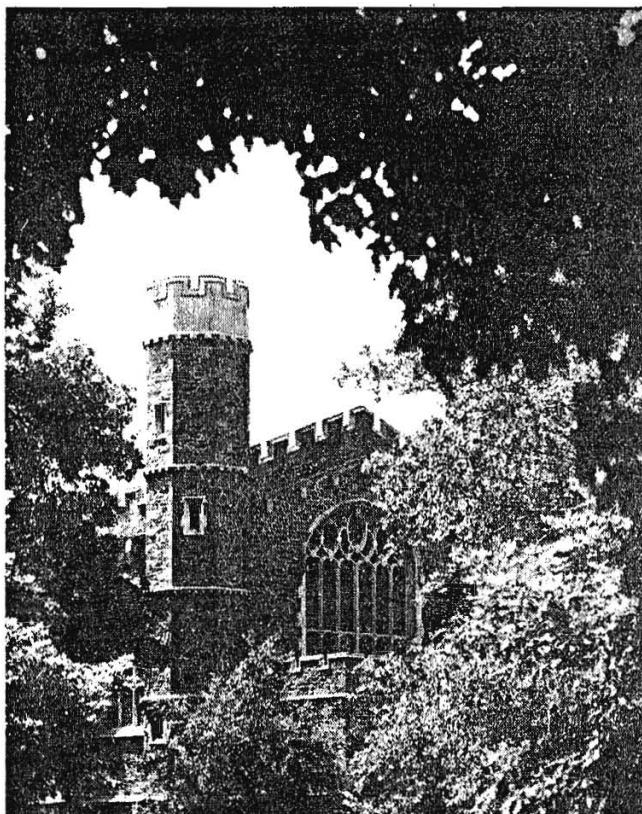
ture as a starting point not to be copied or even revived, but to be used as a conceptual source, a springing point.

With these changing values, it is again reasonable to look at Bryn Mawr, although we do it obviously conditioned by our own recent experiences with architecture, knowing of the great changes that have occurred on other campuses, where the modern principles of architecture and planning have been applied with results that parallel the disintegration of the modern city — dormitory district and bedroom suburb, administrative center and government center, classroom area and central business district; in short both have become places where living is separated from work, and community exists only by telephone.

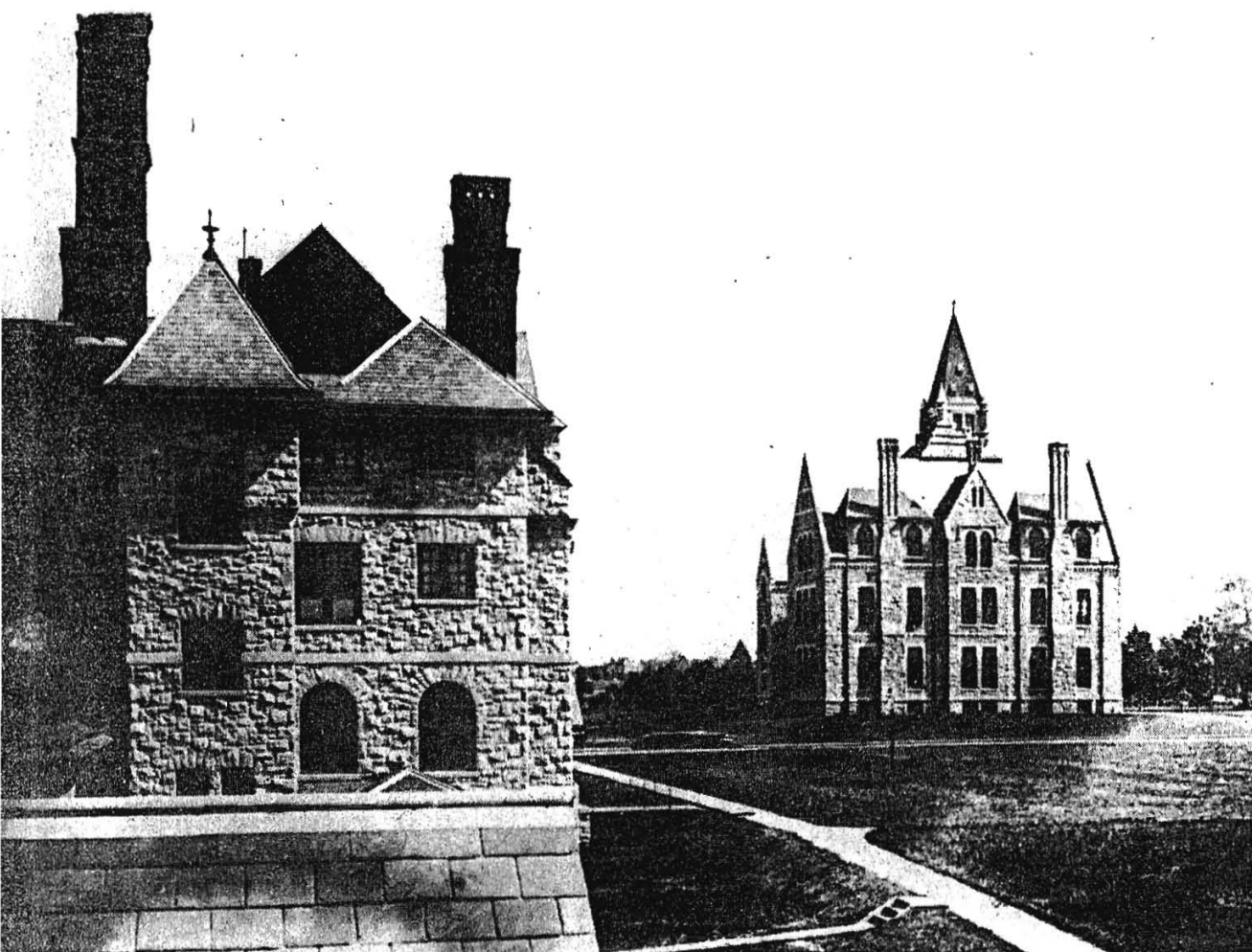
Bryn Mawr is not that — thanks in large measure to its limited growth after World War II. Instead it retains the structure of the democratic village around the green, recalling the New England town with work, residence, civic functions and government all sharing common frontage, and representing the whole life possible in a fully integrated society.

Because the purpose was the "advanced education of females" with the intention of assuring "the true refinement of mind and of manner so essential to complete the human character," the greatest effort was given to the main academic building, begun in 1879, shortly after the property at Bryn Mawr was acquired. It was well underway in 1880, the year that Dr. Taylor died, but the housing scheme to which he had given much thought was only in the drawing stage. The first proposal called for four small cottages, each housing between 30 and 50 women, with a common dining hall, grouped near the main buildings. Such a scheme would prevent congestion, and avoid the petty aggravations of dormitory life. It represented advanced thought for the day.

This type of arrangement was in fact accomplished a few years later at the Williamson Trade School near Media, with a main administration building and smaller cottages grouped around it, and the idea has persisted in the Saarinen-designed Hill Hall at the University of Pennsylvania, and in Louis Kahn's Erdman Hall here at Bryn Mawr, both of the 1960s. Had the cottage scheme been achieved, the village form would have been very direct indeed. But the costs were far greater because it required extensive duplication of heating and plumbing as well as extra construction, and in the end the Trustees, without the active insistence of Dr. Taylor, changed the scheme and built only one large residence, Merion Hall.



"Perhaps it reflected President Thomas' demand for grandeur . . ." Thomas Library, the last structure built by the firm of Cope and Stewardson at Bryn Mawr College.



"The three buildings in a row must have presented a brave sight as one approached the campus . . ." Merion Hall, left, and Taylor Hall soon after Bryn Mawr's opening in 1885.

The style and form of both buildings were dependent on the era, on Addison Hutton, the architect chosen, and on Joseph Taylor's Quaker beliefs. It should be recalled that the 1870s tolerated considerable individualism of detail, color and form — as evidenced by Furness and Hewitt's Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. And to some extent Hutton indicates his appreciation of the era and its taste in the picturesquely placed tower, the original detailing, and the casual siting of Taylor Hall. But Hutton was a member of the Society of Friends and was never overly fond of conspicuous display. Moreover, he no doubt knew of Dr. Taylor's views through a letter from friend Francis King, first president of the Board of Trustees, who wrote to the architect:

There is a certain style of Quaker lady dress which I often see in Philadelphia which tells the whole story — she has her satin bonnet — her silk dress — her kid gloves — her perfect slipper — but they are made to harmonize with the expression of her face which is both intellectual (sic) and holy. So may 'Taylor Hall' look down from its beautiful site on the passing world and we hear (people) say 'Just right.'

In 1883 a gymnasium was added to assure the physical well-being of the students, and again it was Hutton who was called on to design the small brick building in line with Merion. The three buildings in a row must have presented a brave sight as one approached the campus from the station.

Three years later the College began its remarkable association with Philadelphia architects Walter Cope and John Stewardson. How and why they were chosen to replace Hutton can only be guessed. It was, however, probably not a coincidence that there was a new head for the building committee — David Scull, whose niece Martha Carey Thomas had recently been appointed to the faculty. Her biographers suggest that years she spent at the utilitarian campus of Johns Hopkins caused her to develop a considerable interest in the relation of architectural beauty to the complete college — an interest which may have been reflected in the hiring of more promising architects for Radnor Hall than staid Addison Hutton. Walter Cope was not without his connections as well, for he was the nephew of board member Francis Cope, and like Hutton was a member of the Society of Friends. John Stewardson's aunt was Mrs. Francis Cope. For that matter, Walter Cope had received his architectural training in the office of Addison Hutton during the construction of the first three campus buildings, so that he would have had a good understanding of the College's needs. Probably it was a little of everything with the additional factor that their design was quite new — avoiding the electric combination of individual bits in the manner of High Victorian architecture, and in its place substituting a revival of English medieval architecture — in this case

being rather close to the crenellated bulk and massing of such structures as the great gate at Canterbury which Walter Cope had seen on his 1884 visit to England shortly after leaving the employ of Addison Hutton.

At any rate, Radnor Hall in Anglophilic Philadelphia was an immediate success — but more importantly, it suggested a relation between the American residential college and its counterparts at Oxford and Cambridge — a connection which Carey Thomas was quick to grasp and to champion.

For the campus, Radnor also marked a new spatial direction as well, for its strongly marked intersecting wings closed off the flow of buildings to the north, turning further development to the southern edge of the campus. Three years later, Denbigh followed; it was clearly different — a fact which the Board of Trustees noted when they described it not functionally as a dormitory housing so many students, but rather for the first time as having style — in this instance "the collegiate architecture of the Tudor period."

When Pembroke Hall, East and West, followed three years later in 1892, it was the Board that specified that a style would be followed — again the English academic architecture of the late middle ages. With Pembroke, the architects arrived at a mature handling of the style for which they would be best remembered — using the materials and the forms as freely and masterfully as if they had lived in the middle ages, been apprenticed to a medieval master mason and then gone off on their own. The degree to which they gave reality to the role is indicated in an anecdote which was recalled four years later by Carey Thomas in her memorial talk on John Stewardson, who drowned while ice skating on the Schuylkill River, one week before he was to marry: Dean Thomas recalled "To every detail of the internal and external decorations of these halls, Mr. John Stewardson gave his minute personal attention, sometimes as in the case of Pembroke, directing a whole wall to be torn out, and himself showing the masons how to set the stone." That image, of the architect actually building with his own hands, went back to the mid-century exhortation of medievalist John Ruskin, and continued in the person of William Morris, whose Arts and Crafts movement held that design and construction should be the work of the same people.

Now it is obvious that considered purely as design, Denbigh and Pembroke were extraordinary; to Carey Thomas they were "the most beautiful college buildings in America." The disposition of mass, projection and form is masterful; the detail is handsome. In this sense, any architect or historian can appreciate the sureness of proportion, the obvious talents of the designers. Still we, in the twentieth century are conditioned to ask "Why Tudor Gothic?" Why not some plain style without period detail? Unfortunately, unlike many of their contemporaries, Walter Cope and John

Stewardson wrote little, probably because both were dead at or before middle age, Stewardson at 38, in 1896; Cope at 42 of a stroke in 1902. But a hint of their purpose can be gained in a piece written by Stewardson and published in Lippincott's magazine in January 1896, the month of his death. "Unquestionably," he wrote, "the more the mass of people know the historic styles, the less will be the demand for the non-descript and the commonplace."

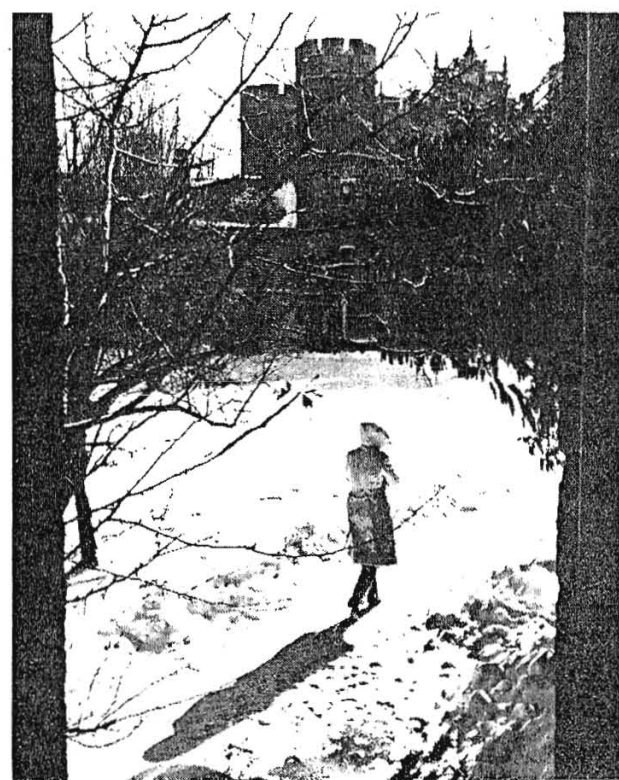
For Cope and Stewardson and their contemporaries, and again in our own time, architecture had to communicate directly, to represent — and to affect. As such, collegiate gothic was particularly effective in its obvious change in style from most turn-of-the-century architecture, signalling the removal of the student from the usual course of life. Moreover, architecture had to fit purpose to place. And how was this achieved? From books or better from the grand tour of Europe such as that made by Walter Cope in 1883-84. By drawing the great buildings of the past as well as the best examples of the present, the young architect learned proportion, detail, in short the traditional elements of design, much as a young art student would make drawings from antique sculpture.

In the process the architect learned a new set of attitudes, that details did not exist independent of context, that the totality was important for the effect to be satisfying, and that given thought, style and function could be effectively correlated to give meaning to the built environment. How directly such a correlation might be found was apparent in the scheme for the new dormitories at the University of Pennsylvania which were originally planned to be similar to the stone Tudor of Bryn Mawr, though such an approach might not have been appropriate for the urban site. But when John Stewardson saw St. John's College, Cambridge, in 1894, the answer to the dilemma was obvious, and the superiority of brick as the principal material was apparent.

Other styles served different uses — high English gothic was adapted to the Ladies Chapel of St. Marks on Locust Street, and English Georgian was adapted to the Law School — no doubt to suggest the 17th century English origins of our legal system. Locally colonial was studied as an appropriate historical mode for a regional domestic architecture.

Continued on page 10

"The disposition of mass, projection and form is masterful; the detail is handsome." Pembroke East as seen from Taylor Hall in a recent photo.



BRYN MAWR CAMPUS

Continued from page 9

Thanks to the earlier work at Bryn Mawr, and the enthusiastic support of President Thomas, Cope and Stewardson began receiving work at other schools. Penn has already been mentioned, and in 1896 Princeton inquired about the architects of Pembroke Hall and shortly afterward hired Cope and Stewardson for Blair Hall, Stafford Little Hall and the gymnasium. Eventually the office designed buildings for Cornell, University of Missouri and finally Washington University at St. Louis, which they won in a national design competition. The collegiate gothic begun at Radnor, Denbigh and Pembroke was a nationally recognized style. The associative and communicative role of architecture was accepted, the national reputation of the firm seemingly secure.

And, there were more buildings to come for Bryn Mawr — first, at the end of the century, Rockefeller Hall, which continued the Pembroke wall to the west, was punctuated by a gate tower, then jogged and turned north again, closing the campus off to the west, directing the attention inwards, back to the College center. Its location and the various vistas created betray another influence in the campus design, for in 1894 the Trustees had had the wisdom to employ the nationally known landscape and planning firm of Frederick Law Olmsted — remembered now for Central Park in New York, the Boston Common and the

greatest triumph of all, the plan of the Great Chicago Exposition of 1893 — to provide a master plan for the College. Working with Cope and Stewardson, they evolved the scheme of the great avenue sweeping from Pembroke Arch past Taylor into open space and a new diagonal vista passing through Rockefeller Arch and intersecting the corner of a new building — the Thomas Library that Bryn Mawr by then badly needed. By careful placement, it gives definition to two spaces, one along Pembroke and another towards the green, and it forms a third space, the cloister within, forming the only absolute retreat from campus life.

In Thomas, Cope made his one major whimsical gesture on the campus, in the great hall. Although it proved to be a difficult library it has found an important and useful role as a social hall. Perhaps it reflected President Thomas' demand for grandeur; at any rate, she claimed to have had a major role in bringing the great hall of Wadham College, Oxford, to her campus, as she surely did in finding English carver Alec Miller, who carved the wonderful grotesques in the cloister. With these two buildings the essential elements of the campus were complete.

When Walter Cope died at the age of 42, his firm's achievement was already acknowledged; for President Thomas, there was no doubt of their success. As she told the students in her memorial talk, "Our Bryn Mawr buildings are truly original in their adaptation of Jacobean Gothic — and possess more Romance and charm than any except the most beautiful of the older colleges at Cambridge and Oxford, and they are in themselves far more sympathetic and satisfying in their architectural effect than any of the many college buildings erected in England after Jacobean models." □